

UNDER THE DOME¹

By WALDO FRANK

(From the *Dial*)

THEY were two figures under the grey of the Dome — two straight faint figures of black; they were a man and woman with heads bowed, straight — under the surge of the Dome.

I

Friday night, when always he broke away in order to pray in the *Schul*, and when she sat in the shop and had to speak with the customers who came, these praying hours of Friday night. *Shabbas* morning at least he did not go also.— My heart tells me it is wrong. Lord, forgive me for Esther and for my little girl. Lord, you know it is for them I do not go to *Schul* on *Shabbas* morning — But by God, you will keep the store those two hours Friday! Do you hear? By God, what else have I ever asked you for? Don't you sit around, do nothing all the day, and aren't Flora's clothes a filth? and hardly if you'll cook our meals. But this you will do: this you will do! Friday nights. Lord, why is there no light in Esther? What have I done, Lord? what have I not done?

She sat in a chair, always, near the side wall: her eyes lay burning against the cold glare of the gas.

Above her shoulder on the wall was a large sheet of fashions: women with wasp waists, smirking, rolling: stiff men, all clothes, with little heads. Under the table — where Meyer sits with his big feet so much to look at — Flora played, a soiled bundle, with a ball of yarn and a huge gleaming scizzors.— No one perhaps comes, and then I do not mind sitting and keeping the store. I saw

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a dead horse in the street.— A dead horse, two days dead, rotting and stiff. Against the grey of the living street, a livid dead horse: a hot stink was his cold death against the street's clean-ness. There are two little boys, wrapped in blue coat, blue muffler, leather caps. They stand above the gaunt head of the horse and sneer at him. His flank rises red and huge. His legs are four strokes away from life. He is dead. The naughty boys pick up bricks. They stand, very close, above the head of the horse. They hurl down a brick. It strikes the horse's skull, falls sharp away. They hurl down a brick. It cuts the swollen nostril, falls soft away. The horse does not mind, the horse does not hurt. He is dead.

— Go away, you two! Throwing stones at a dead horse! Go away, I say! How would you like — When one is dead, stones strike one's skull and fall sharp away, one is moveless. When one is dead, stones strike the soft of one's throat and fall soft away, one is hurtless. When one is dead one does not hurt.

She sat and turned her eyes away from her child. Flora had smear on her face; her hands were grimed with the floor. One of her stockings was down: her little white knee was going to scrape on the floor, be black before it was bloody. So — A long shining table under a cold gas spurt. A store with clothes and a stove: no place for herself. A row of suits, all pressed and stiff with Meyer's diligence. A pile of suits, writhed with the wear of men, soiled, crumpled with traffic of streets, with bending of bodies in toil, in eating, in loving perhaps. Grimed living suits. Meyer takes an iron and it steams and it presses hard, it sucks up the grime. It sucks out the life from the suit. The suit is stiff and dead, now, ready to go once more over the body of a man and suck to itself his life.

The automatic bell clangs. There in the open door was a dark tall woman — customer.

Esther stood, too. She felt she was shorter and less tidy: more beautiful though.

Two women across the tailor-shop, seeing each other.

"I came for my husband's — for Mr. Breddan's dress suit. Mr. Lanich told him it would be ready at seven?"

Esther Lanich moved, Sophie Breddan stood. Between slow dark curve, swift dark stroke of these two women, under a tailor's table the burn of a dirty child, mumbling intent with scizzors between her soiled frail legs, at play with loose hair.

"Is this the one?"

The curve and the stroke came near across the table.

"Yes."

Eyes met.—She is tidy and fresh, less beautiful, though, than I. She has no child. She has a flat with Sun and a swell husband who wears a swallow-tail and takes her out to parties. She has a diamond ring, her corsets are sweet. She has things to put into her time like candies into her mouth, like loved kisses into my mouth. She is all new with her smooth skin going below the collar of her suit.

—She has a child, and she lets her play dirty with scizzors under a tailor table. "How much is it?"—After a decent bedtime.

—Does she think I care about this? "Oh, no hurry. Better come in and pay my—Mr. Lanich. Any time."

The clang of the bell.

Esther is seated. Her grey tilted eyes seem sudden to stand upon the farther wall of her husband's shop, and to look upon her. Her eyes speak soft warm words that touch her hair, touch her lips, lie like caressing fingers upon the soft cloth that lies upon her breast.

—Less beautiful than I, though. My flesh is soft and sweet, it is the colour of cream. What for? My hair is like an autumn tree gleaming with sun. I can let it fall through the high channel of my breast against my stomach that does not bulge but lies soft and low like a cushion of silk. What for? My eyes see beauty. What for? O there is no God. If there is God, what for?—He will come back and work. He will eat and work. He is kind and good. What for? When he is excited with love, doesn't he make an ugly noise with his nose? What else does he make with his love?—Another like Flora? God forbid. What for?

She did not pull down the wide yellow shade, though it was night. The street was a ribbon of velvet blackness

laid beside the hurting and sharp brightness of the store. The yellow light was hard like grains of sand under the quick of her nails. She was afraid of the street. She was hurt in the store. But the brightness clamped her. She did not move.— O let no more customers come! “Keep quiet, Flora.” I can not move.— She was clamped.

But the store moved, moved.

There was a black wheel with a gleaming axle — the Sun — that sent light dimming down its spokes as it spun. From the rim of the wheel where it was black, bright dust flung away as it spun. The store was a speck of bright dust. It flung straight. It moved along the velvet path of the street, touching, not merging with its night. It moved, it moved, she sat still in its moving. The store caught up with Meyer. He entered the store. He was there. He was there, scooped up from the path of the street by the store. Now her work was over. He was there. The store was a still store, fixed in a dirty house. Its brightness the spurt of two jets of gas. He was back from *Schul*.— That is all.

A man with blond hair, flat feet that shuffled, small tender hands. A man with a mouth gentle, slow; with eyes timid to see. “Come dear: that is no place.”— Why she lets the child play with my shears!

Tender hands pull Flora from beneath the table. Flora comes blinking, unprotesting. Where her father’s hands leave off from her, she stays. She sinks back to the floor. She looks at her little fists from which the scizzors are gone. She misses hard gleaming steel. She opens and shuts her fists and looks at them: she cries. But she does not move.— Her mother does not move.— Her father does not move. He squats on the table. His head sways with his thoughts. He knows that Flora will stop — what can he do? — in perhaps half an hour. It is a weak cry. Grows weaker. He is used to it. There is work.

He sews. ‘A woman of valour who can find? For her price is far above rubies’— She will stay here, stay here silent. Flora should be in bed. Who to put his child in bed? Hard gas-light on her beloved hair? A wither, a wilt — ‘She is like the merchant ships; she bringeth her

food from afar' — He sews and rips.— What, Lord, have I left undone? I love my Esther.— He sews.— I love my little girl. Lord, I fear the Lord — 'She looketh well to the ways of the household, and eateth not the bread of idleness.'— Lighten me, Lord, give me light. There is my daughter crying, who should sleep: and my wife sitting, who will not, who will never without me go home. She is afraid. She says she is afraid. She is sullen and silent. She is so fair and sweet against my heart. Lord! why did her hands that held my head speak a lie? and her silent lips that she let press upon my mouth, why were they lies? Lord, I cannot understand. Lord, I pray. I must sew bread for Esther and for my child. I go to *Schul* at least once each *Shabbas*, Lord — Do I not fill the deep ten Penitential Days from *Rosh Ha Shonoh* to *Yom Ha Kippurim* with seeking out of heart? — He sews, he rips. The weeping of his child is done. Long stitches, here. She has found a chair's leg to play with. Her moist fingers clasp at the shrill wood. The wooden chair and her soft flesh wrestle. Esther sits still. He sews.

' Her children arise, and call her blessed;
 Her husband also, and he praiseth her;
 — Many daughters have done valiantly,
 But thou excellest them all.—
 Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain;
 But a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be
 praised.
 Give her of the fruit of her hands;
 And let her works praise her in the gates.'

II

In the door and the clang again of the bell, a boy with them. A boy they knew — son of their neighbours — big for his years and heavy, with fat lips, eyes clouded, hair black and low over his clouded eyes. Esther alone saw, as he lurched in, one foot dragging always slightly.

He went for little Flora with no greeting for them: familiarly as he knew he would find her, had come so, often.— He loves her. The man who squats on the table

and sews smiles on the boy who loves and plays with his child.

"Hello, kid," voice of a thick throat, "look — what I got for you here."

Flora lets the chair of her late love lurch against her back, strike her forward. She does not care. She watches two hands — grey-caked over red — unwrap from paper a dazzle of colours, place it to her eyes on the floor, pull with a string: it has little wheels, it moves!

"Quackle-duck," he announces.

Flora spreads out her hands, sinks on her rump, feels its green head that bobs with purple bill, feels its yellow tail.

"Quackle-duck — yours," says the boy.

She takes the string from his hand. With shoulder and stomach she swings her arm backward and pulls. The duck spurts, bobbing its green long head against her leg.

She plays. The boy on his knees with soiled thick drawers showing between his stockings and his pants plays with her. —

Meyer Lanich did not cease from work, nor his woman from silence. His face was warm in pleasure, watching his child who had a toy and a playmate. — I am all warm and full of love for Herbert Rabinowich: perhaps some day I can show him, or do something for his father. Now there was no way but to go on working, and smile so the pins in his mouth did not prick.

The eyes of Esther drew a line from these two children back to the birth of the one that was hers. She dwelt in a world about the bright small room like the night: in a world that roared and wailed, that reeled with despair of her hope.

She had borne this dirty child all clean beneath her heart. Her belly was sweet and white, it had borne her: her breasts were high and proud, they had emptied, they had come to sag for this dirty child on the floor — face and red lips on a floor that any shoes might step.

Had she not borne a Glory through the world, bearing this stir of perfect flesh? Had she not borne a song through the harsh city? Had she not borne another mite of pain, another fleck of dirt upon the city's shame-heaps?

She lies in her bed burned in sweet pain. Pain wrings her body, wrings her soul like the word of the Lord within lips of Deborah. Her bed with white sheets, her bed with its pool of blood is an altar where she lays forth her Glory which she has walking carried like a song through the harsh city.— What have I mothered but dirt? —

A transfigured world she knows she will soon see. Yes: it is a flat of little light — and the bugs seep in from the other flats no matter how one cleans — it is a man of small grace, it is a world of few windows. But her child will be borne to smite life open wide. Her child shall leap above its father and its mother as the sun above forlorn fields.— She arose from her bed. She held her child in her arms. She walked through the reeling block with feet aflame. She entered the shop.— There — squatting with feet so wide to see — her man: his needle pressed by the selfsame finger. The world was not changed for her child. Behold her child changing — let her sit for ever upon her seat of tears — let her lay like fire to her breast this endless vision of her child changing unto the world.—

— I have no voice, I have no eyes. I am a woman who has lain with the world.

The world's voice upon my lips gave my mouth gladness.

The world's arms about my flanks gave my flesh glory. I was big with gladness and glory.

Joyful I lost in love of my vision my eyes, in love of my song my voice.

I have borne another misery into the world.—

Meyer Lanich moves, putting away the trousers he has patched.— O Lord, why must I sew so many hours in order to reap my pain? Why must I work so long, heap the hard wither of so many hours upon my child who can not sleep till I do, in order that all of us may be unhappy?

The clang and the door open. The mother of the boy. "Oh, here you are! Excuse me, friends. I was worrying over Herbert.— Well, how goes it?"

She smiled and stepped into the room: saw them all.

"All well, Mrs. Rabinowich," said Meyer. "We are so glad when your Herbert comes to play with Florchen."

Mrs. Rabinowich turns the love of her face upon the children who do not attend her. A grey long face, bitterly pock-marked, in a glow of love.

"Look what your Herbert brought her," Meyer sews and smiles. "A toy. He shouldn't, now. Such a thing costs money."

Mrs. Rabinowich puts an anxious finger to her lips.

"Don't," she whispers. "If he wants to, he should. It is lovely that he wants to. There's money enough for such lovely wants.—Well, darling. Won't you come home to bed?"

Herbert does not attend.

His mother sighed — a sigh of great appeasement and of content.— This is my son! She turned to where Esther sat with brooding eyes. Her face was serious now, grey ever, warm with a grey sorrow. Her lips moved: they knew not what to say.

"How are you, Esther?"

"Oh, I am well, Mrs. Rabinowich. Thank you." A voice resonant and deep, a voice mellowed by long keeping in the breast of a woman.

"Why don't you come round, some time, Esther? You know, I should always be so glad to see you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Rabinowich."

"You know — we're just next door," the older woman smiled. "You got time, I think. More time than I."

"Oh, she got time all right!" The sharp words flash from the soft mouth of Meyer, who sews and seems in no way one with the sharp words of his mouth. Esther does not look. She takes the words as if like stones they had fallen in her lap. She smiles away. She is still. And Lotte Rabinowich is still, looking at her with a deep wonder, shaking her head, unappeased in her search.

She turns at last to her boy: relieved.

"Come Herbert, now. Now we really got to go."

She takes his hand that he lets limply rise. She pulls him gently.

"Good night, dear ones.— Do come, some time, Esther — yes?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Rabinowich."

Meyer says: "Let the boy come when he wants. We love to have him."

His mother smiles.—Of course: who would not love to have him? Good heart, fine boy, dear child. "It's long past bedtime. Naughty!" She kisses him.

Herbert, a little like a horse, swings away his heavy head.

They are gone in the bell's jangle.

"What a good boy: what a big-hearted boy!" Meyer said aloud. "I like the boy. He will be strong and a success, you see."

Her words, "I saw him lift the skirt of Flora and peep up," she could not utter. She was silent, seeing the dull boy with the dirty mind, and his mother and Meyer through love thinking him good. What she saw in her silence hurt her.

Her hurt flowed out in fear. She saw her child: a great fear came on Esther.—Flora is small and white, the world is full of men with thick lips, hairy hands, of men who will lift her skirt and kiss her, of men who will press their hairiness against her whiteness.

—There is a Magic, Love, whereby this shame is sweet. Where is it? A world of men with hair and lips against her whiteness. Where is the magic against them? Esther was very afraid. She hated her daughter.

III

Meyer Lanich came down from his table and drew down the wide yellow shade and shut out the night. No more stray customers to enter. He turned the key of the door. He had his back to the door, seeing his work and his child who now sat vacant upon the floor and grimed her eyes with her fists too sleepy to hunt play — seeing his wife. He sought to see this woman who was his wife. To this end came his words, old words, old words he had tried often, often failed with, words that would come again since they were the words of his seeking to find the woman his wife.

"Esther," he said, "it is nine o'clock and I have much work to do — a couple of hours of work.—" — I could work faster alone, it will be midnight so with this pain for ever in my eyes. "Esther won't you go home and put Florchen to bed?"

She looked at him with her full lovely eyes. Why since he saw them lovely could he not see them loving? He had said these words before, so often before. She looked at him.

"Esther," he said, "it is bad for a baby of four to be up so late. It is bad for her to sit around on the floor under the gas — smelling the gas and the gasoline and the steam of the clothes. Can't you consider Flora?"

"I am afraid."

"What is there to be afraid of? Can't you see? Why aren't you afraid of what will happen to Flora? Eh — that don't frighten you, does it? She's a baby. If my Mother could see —"

"Meyer, I can't. Meyer, I can't. You know that I can't."

He waved his hands. She was stiff. They came no nearer one to the other. About them each, two poles, swirled thoughts and feeling — a world that did not touch the other.

He clambered back to his work. The room was hot. The gaslight burred. Against his temples it beat harsh air, harsh light, the acrid smells of his work — against her temples.

Esther sat. The words of her man seeking the woman she was had not found for him but had stirred her. Her breast moved fast, but all else of her was stiff. Stiff, all she moved like a thick river drawn against its flow, drawn mounting to its head.— I cannot go home alone, to the empty hall alone, into the black rooms alone. Against their black the flicker of a match that may go out, the dare of a gas-light that is all white and shrieking with its fear of the black world it is in. She could not go home alone.— For, Esther, in your loneliness you will find your life. I am afraid of my life.

She was caught, she was trapped.— I am miserable. Let me only not move.— Since to move was to break

against walls of a trap. Here in the heart of movelessness a little space. Let her not stir where the walls and the roof of the black small trap will smite her!

IV

The room moves up the dimension of time. Hour and hour and hour. Bearing its freight toward sleep. Thick hot room, torn by the burr of two lights, choked by the strain of two bound souls, moving along the night. Writhing in dream. Singing.—

— My flesh sings for silk and rich jewels;
My flesh cries for the mouth of a king.
My hair, why is it not a canopy of love,
Why does it not cover sweet secrets of love?
My hair cries to be laid upon white linen.
I have brought misery into the world.—
I have lived with a small man and my dreams have
shrunk him,
Who in my dreams enlarged the glory of princes.
He looks upon me with soft eyes, and my flesh is
hard against them.
He beats upon me with warm heart, and my breasts
do not rise up for him.
They are soft and forgetful of his beating heart.
My breasts dream far when he is near to them —
They droop, they die.
His hands are a tearful prayer upon my body —
I sit: there is no way between my man and my
dream,
There is no way between my life and life,
There is no way between my love and my child.
I lie: and my eyes are shut. I sleep: and they open.
A world of mountains
Plunges against my sleep.—

— Lord, Lord: this is my daughter before me, her cheeks that have not bloomed are wilting. Preserve her, Lord. This is my wife before me, her love that has not lived is dead.— Time is a barren field that has no end.

I see no horizon. My feet walk endlessly, I see no horizon.
— I am faithful, Lord.—

The tailor-shop is black. It has moved up three hours into midnight. It is black.

Esther and Meyer walk the grey street. In the arms of the man sleeps Flora. His arm aches. He dares not change her to his other arm. Lest she wake.

He has undressed her. Gentle hands of a man. He holds her little body, naked, near his eyes. Her face and her hands, her feet and her knees are soiled. The rest of her body is white — very white — no bloom upon her body. He kisses her black hair.

He lays her away beneath her coverlet.

There is his wife before him. She is straight. Her naked body rises, column of white flame, from her dun skirt. Esther — his love — she is in a case of fire. Within her breasts as within hard jewels move the liquids of love. Within her body, as within a case, lies her soul, pent, which should pour forth its warmth upon them.

He embraces her.

"Esther.— Esther —" He can say no more.

His lips are at her throat. Can he not break her open?

She sways back, yielding. Her eyes swerve up. They catch the cradle of her child.

— Another child — another agony of glory — another misery to the world?

She is stiff in the unbroken case of a vast wound all about her.

So they lie down in bed. So they sleep.

She has cooked their breakfast.

They walk, a man and a woman, down the steep street to work. A child between them, holding the hand of a man.

They are grey, they are sullen. They are caught up in the sullen strife of their relentless life. There is no let to them. Time is a barren field with no horizon.